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ABSTRACT

The new capability of cable television (CATV) to provide relevant programming to local communities should be recognized so that inner city consumers can be provided with direct, personal information--warning, comparative prices, and the sense that someone cares. At least one channel should be devoted as a key to these services, with other channels providing more in depth coverage. The staffing of the system should grow out of the community itself, and programming should serve the community's needs. Some program concepts which might be included are a general home show designed for the inner city housewife, a program on credit and installment buying, programs which demonstrate how people can use government, and other programs which might cover such areas as courts and legal systems, insurance, medicine, health and nutrition, children, housing, price levels, opportunities outside the ghetto, over-commitment in buying, utility companies, and environmental protection. It is most important in developing such community programming where names will be named and specific products and practices endorsed that the responsibility for accuracy as well as candor is recognized. For this reason, it would probably be best to have an independent group providing supervision for research and decision-making. (SH)

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TOWARD AN IMMODEST EXPERIMENT IN CABLE TELEVISION: MODESTLY PRODUCED

by

Judy Crichton

March 1971

A Report Prepared for the
SLOAN COMMISSION ON CABLE COMMUNICATIONS

The opinions expressed herein are the views of the author and do not reflect necessarily the opinions of the members of the Sloan Commission on Cable Communications or of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing fury in inner city and ghetto areas, sparked by a rising level of expectation which is frustrated at every turn. The ghetto-based consumer faces all the problems of our society in general, compounded by his own special situation. He is the victim of well-organized fraudulent schemes, calculatedly designed to take advantage of his lack of education, his growing sense of personal ambition and little or no immediate cash or credit.

Limited income does not mean limited desires. He is as urgently pursued and enticed by the flood of commercials as his more sophisticated and affluent counterpart. And, without the poise and assurance to take his business out of the neighborhood, he's an easy target.

He is only dimly aware of his rights as a consumer and often too confused or frightened to pursue them. He needs to learn how to deal with big city bureaucracy, how to go to court when necessary and how to identify people and services he can trust.

The growing field of consumer protection has barely begun to touch him. Colston Warne, President of Consumer's Union says, "the inability to reach the poor has been the tragedy of the organization." [Consumer's Union]

A community oriented cable television system could provide the inner city consumer with direct, personal information: warnings, comparative prices, and, more importantly, with the sense that someone cares. Such a service would reflect problems, suggest solutions and be a continuing outlet for his frustrations.

Recognizing that cable television offers the most powerful media for communicating all forms of service material, it is also vital to realize that no matter how noble our intentions, this system will also be competing with the great power and seduction of commercial television.

Need is not a sufficient draw. Our tolerance for a small audience should not reject our desire for a larger one and we must understand that any audience at all today has to be won.

On every level, television audiences have notoriously resisted what is good for them. With few exceptions, the exploration of serious material on television, no matter how important, has been resisted by all but the most sophisticated viewers.

It seems logical that this resistance can only be broken down by creating a really powerful and <u>entertaining</u> community force.

My own feeling is that the most viable, effective and economic use of a cable television system will be to include in every local cable TV system a key channel.

This would provide Hunts Point, Bedford Stuyvesant, East Harlem, and Harlem all with their own "television stations", which would function much like a small town newspaper.

While there would be a certain overlapping of material between stations (as local papers have used wire services), most of the prgramming would be community produced and the content would reflect a small town paper's.

It would combine information with community news and entertainment. Births, deaths and weddings would be covered. Church services, school activities, graduations, sports, community meetings -- all the community news that never reaches the large metropolitan paper, but is of basic, daily interest.

The key channel would carry local ads, personals, help-wanted notices (all a potential source of income). It would provide an advertising outlet for cooperatives and responsible local business, (long a problem in these communities).

By supporting responsible local business while pointing out the standard ghetto malpractices (unreasonable credit terms, unwarranted prices and unreliable merchandise) it would go far toward creating a healthier climate within the community for the consumer.

It would develop community pride and, like the old-time local paper, become a true community force. People would have an opportunity to see themselves, their neighbors and their friends, exploring the life and the problems they all share.

With its unique flexibility it could produce a kind of programming that has never existed. Freed from the pressure to develop a mass market and from commercial restrictions, this form of television would be highly personal and helpful and could be relentlessly honest. (A criteria that would inevitably have an impact, if only for its unusualness today).

Reflecting that important characteristic of the newspaper -- the ability to re-read and absorb complicated material -- the neighborhood channel would regularly re-run programs. Both special interest groups and individual viewers would be able to request these re-runs.

Developing the idea of viewer control, there is no reason, given today's technology, why viewers on a cable television system couldn't have a direct vote on certain programming via a signal device built right into their own sets.

"The open hour next week can be devoted to a program on

1) buying a used car
2) how to protect yourself against door-to-door frauds
3) the truth behind funeral expenses
4) installment buying - and how to tell if you're being taken
5) how to take a merchant to court

Which of these programs would you most like to see?"

The very act of voting would not only develop audience loyalty, but would also provide a lure never available on commercial television.

While the key channel in these local communication systems would be responsible for covering all aspects of community life, associated channels on each line would provide indepth coverage. A viewer wishing more information on housing, employment opportunities, nutrition, etc. will be advised to turn to another channel.

Because the channels would not be competetive, viewers would be regularly informed of all the viewing possibilities open to him.

STAFFING

The staffing of each cable television system must grow out of the community itself. While the core staff will have to be skillful and professional, it should reflect the community it is serving the way a local newspaper staff does rather than following the deliberately impersonal staffing pattern of a commercial television station. Both on and off-the-air personnel must reflect each community's integral make-up ethnically, culturally, philosophically and politically.

Local lawyers, teachers, doctors and politicians would all be used as experts in their fields. Local researchers would be hired. Local actors, writers and performers encouraged. The station would become an accepted training ground for many young people in the community.

Local residents would provide social and community coverage. For example, the President of the PTA might make a fine on-air reporter for a high school program; a gym teacher or local businessman could report on neighborhood sports. Local politicians could find a forum aimed directly at their own constituency.

PROGRAMMING

(Note: The following programming suggestions all deal with consumer information. The material is designed not only to grow out of a community's needs but, hopefully, also will serve to influence that community. While the program ideas are specific, it is important to consider them in the context of a lively communications system).

While we have been encouraged in these reports to shed our standard professional television concepts, with all their restrictions, certain commercial forms and ideas will be useful.

I feel strongly that a cable television channel in regular operation should never go dark. That there is a strong tendency among less sophisticated viewers to turn on a set and leave it on -- as a kind of electronic companion. Periods between formal shows can be filled with repeats, informal messages, music, etc.

Also, while we boast of cable television's great flexibility, it is important to recognize that viewing patterns are strongly rooted in habit and that certain kinds of programming will benefit by being made available at regular times.

For instance:

I. <u>The Morning Show</u>

A general home show designed for the inner city housewife.

This program, while shown regularly in the morning for six days a week (in recognition of the fact that many inner city people do a major marketing on Saturday), might also be repeated at night for the working woman.

In many respects it would reflect the conventional woman's service show that has always been a part of commercial television, except that,in this case, the moderator and all the material on the program would reflect the specific interests, restrictions and customs of low-income minority groups rather than those of the middle-class white audience existing programs are designed for.

(Note: This first program concept raises a subtle philosophic point. While program content must reflect the community, it should not be used to perpetuate the ghetto. While stemming from community interests, it can also broaden horizons, inspire and give insight into wider worlds, without ever losing a very realistic approach).

The moderator for The Morning Show would act not just as a host but as an on-air reporter. She would report on local marketing conditions, specials, best buys (that are really best buys) and seasonal advantages.

She would incorporate interviews and graphic demonstrations (perhaps with locally filmed inserts) of unit pricing and food stamp programs, plus information on available services for the very young and very old. (These problems will, of course, be taken up in additional programming, but also have a place on a general service show of this type).

Recognizing that low-income families often spend a disproportionate amount of their food budgets on soft drinks and 'junk' food, every show would include basic diet and health information. Recipes and menus would be a regular feature and would, of course, grow out of the culture of the community itself.

Designed to build a dependent audience, this program would start at a regular time, but could run as long as the material dictated.

II. Credit

In ghetto areas problems revolving around credit and installment buying are basic. Because this problem is so complex (and, on the surface, boring), it should be explored in very real-life situations, probably in connection with one major purchase.

Credit (cont'd.)

The subject might be presented in a series on how to buy a car, a major appliance, etc., designed to run at night when both men and women are most likely to watch it. The case history of one purchase might be told over the course of several evenings.

Each program would include an end-segment during which viewers would be encouraged to call a studio-based expert for information and suggestions.

(Note: Where this device is now used on commercial radio and television, the calls are instigated to provide program content. Our concept, recognizing that a cable TV's responsibility is to go beyond immediate broadcasting, would encourage calls as one way of getting reliable information into the community. All calls generated by the station, whether incorporated in actual programming or not, would be responsibly answered. Phones would be staffed by people capable of following up on individual problems.

Credit (cont'd.)

> Because audience participation is such an integral part of this programming, the studio phone number would be sold, like a clever commercial, so that it would be truly easy to use. (The number itself might be incorporated as a permanent design element within the set).

Perhaps the most interesting way to produce a series on major purchases would be to take actual people from the community and follow them step by step through such a purchase.

In the case of buying a car, we might begin with a real family actually in need of a car. The first program in the series, filmed in their own home, would record a discussion led by an expert and structured to analyze their need, the kind of car (large, small, second-hand or new) and the various manners of financing available to them.

Incorporated in this same episode might be a sequence with a neighbor who had had a bad experience in terms of either financing or in buying a "lemon".

Credit (cont'd.)

The second episode would involve finding the car and checking its condition. The third would cover procurement of financing, insurance, license plates, etc., and be climaxed by actually driving the car home.

By the end of this mini-series, viewers should have a clear view at least of the steps involved in buying a car.

The technique of filming real people and pursuing real consumer needs will serve as a strong and provocative base for many service-oriented programs. It is an obvious way of presenting viewers with identifiable situations to which they can relate.

Because many fraudulent ghetto sales techniques (door-to-door sales, misleading ads, pyramiding credit costs, etc.) keep popping up in different guises, a series of warning spots should be produced, both specific and generic.

With the flexibility of the cable TV system, these "commercials" would run anywhere from ten seconds to two or three minutes, depending on the material.

They would either be made with real people from the community who had suffered bad experiences, or with names, celebrities either from the community or popular there. It would not be difficult to attract important volunteers, since these spots would be easy to produce.

III. Dealing with Bureaucracy

There is, as we all know, confusion and considerable cynicism among ghetto-based people about their rights in dealing with local, state and federal governments, coupled with outright suspicion toward the courts.

Several different kinds of programming can be designed to show people how to use their governments rather than fear them.

In the past, local storefront consumer protection offices have failed because of lack of interest and support from the very people they were designed to service.

With the new, highly portable remote units, it would be easy to design opportunities for a community to "eavesdrop" on such services.

A camera set up in a consumer office could generate interest in that office by illustrating the ease and civility of the operation.

IV. Courts

Similarly, audiences might be introduced to legal and court procedures, possibly by following the actual case of a nieghbor.

Courts (cont'd.)

If frightened and insecure people are given a chance to watch someone they know, or have the possibility of knowing, pursue his rights through the mystery of civil court, they might well discover it is simpler and less inhospitable than previously imagined. In removing the mystery, perhaps one could remove some of the fear and insecurity, and thereby encourage people to take action in the courts. And, of course, the very possibility of consumers taking legal action would in turn be a deterrent on community malpractices.

V. Insurance

Insurance is a recurring problem area in ghetto life. Consumers buy death insurance that barely covers funeral expenses, life insurance that is too often written to suggest almost uncollectable savings plans, and just plain "insurance" that remains an unproductive enigma for life.

People need to understand the insurance they have, what alternatives are available, and how to buy it.

One way of unraveling the enigma through cable TV would be to cover a community meeting (held in a local church or community center) where residents could bring their own existing policies to be analyzed.

Insurance (cont'd.)

One could film a series of people presenting their policies to an expert, who would explain exactly what kind of insurance they do and do not have.

Pre-interviewed participants could tell stories of their own unhappy insurance experiences (i.e. the 65-year old woman who has just discovered that her 20-year old savings policy on which she has been paying monthly can only be collected on her 85th birthday).

With constant shifts in government insurance policies, social security and medicare, it is also vital for people to understand what kind of public insurance is available. That information could be handled in subsequent programming which could also be broken down into spot announcements that could be repeated from time to time.

(Note: Many elements within these formal programs can be used as fillers, to be repeated like commercials. It is an inexpensive way of producing "commercials" and of being able to repeat the most pertinent information developed within a show).

VI. Medicine

Medical problems overlap the consumer field and a consumer oriented medical series might be very helpful. It would cover:

how to find a private doctor;
how to discuss fees and how to pay for them;
available free medical service within the community;
how to buy drugs (with an explanation of generic drugs - Aspirin is aspirin is aspirin);
how long drugs keep;
where to have your eyes examined;
where to buy glasses;
available clinics;
dental care: free and private;
psychiatric care: what it means
who needs it
how to get it.

Such a program would inevitably tie in with local medical authorities and include warnings on local health problems and home remedies.

Ideally, the program would be run by a community doctor known by the viewers, and would include a question and answer segment via mail, a studio audience or phone.

VII. Health/Nutrition

Health problems in ghetto areas often result from food problems. While the general MORNING SHOW (program idea #1) would cover this material, and the medical series would touch on it, these problems should also be reported in short commercial-type spots.

Filmed segments, produced in the homes of actual community residents could be used to illustrate good and bad nutrition habits, proper food handling, and the dangers of food that has "turned". There is a need to constantly explore how to keep left-overs and frozen foods, and to discuss whether damaged cans are or are not usuable. (They are often sold in ghetto food stores at cut-rate prices).

This same series of spots might explore conditions in local markets, warn consumers what conditions to look for when buying meat, dairy products, frozen foods. It would take up seasonal problems, particularly summer spoilage.

Where a situation lent itself, one program might be devoted to tracing an actual case of food poisoning.

VIII. Children

Children reflect consumer problems and are often the key to establishing family patterns. Ghetto children are particularly sensitive to the bombardment of advertisments they've been subjected to by commercial television.

Children (cont'd.)

Unrealistic desires are the source of many problems. The world has long been plagued with the urge to keep up with the Joneses, but never has a people been reminded so constantly of the things they do not have.

Children need consumer oriented programming that will cogently point out the true shoddiness of fad toys, help them develop a sense of comparison shopping, and even teach them how to go about buying a second-hand bike (instilling in them the sense of pride that will make that bike even more important than its brand new equivalent).

A consumer oriented game show with young neighborhood contestants could raise interest in comparison shopping, teach unit pricing and food values, and generally explore the whole area of low finances.

Such a show might not only run Saturday mornings but also be piped into local public schools, which, in turn, would provide the contestants. The Consumer Protection Board, Consumers Union, and Cornell University's Cooperative Extension could supplement this material with teaching aids to generate additional interest.

IX. Shut-Ins

The other large category of consumers in need of special programming are home-bound mothers, invalids, old people and other shut-ins who are hindered from going to the marketplace to make their own selections.

A daily program for shut-ins could provide a unique shopping service. A comparison shopper could report on "best buys" in food, clothes, small appliances and services.

Home viewers could be offered a choice of items (i.e. six excellent buys in blankets). If a viewer was interested, all he would have to do is indicate by signal light (the system installed in his television set) and a representative would call.

Food purchasing could be handled in a similar manner. Viewers could be offered a week's worth of food made up of different commodities and quantities, signalling which they wanted to order.

It could be a real boost for a shut-in to retain at least the right to marginal choice, to window shop in his own community.

Additional programs for older people would cover the problem of buying for the single person; available community services; explanations on medicare, social security and welfare programs; news on available housing.

X. Housing

With housing such a continuing problem among the poor, one regular program might be devoted to this problem, and could cover the whole spectrum. The rights of the renter; low-cost housing outside the city; home purchase; cooperatives and how they function.

Again, many of these stories would be told directly through the eyes of a family with a housing problem. Daily spots would inform the community of available apartments.

XI. Price Levels

It has been established that prices in ghetto areas on standard consumer goods often exceed those of similar products being sold in so-called "good neighborhoods". It is said that prices often rise the day welfare checks come out. If these practices in fact do occur, a community television station could wipe them out.

A daily price list, based on reasonable averages, could inform inner city buyers of honest going-price levels, and might force community stores into line.

XII. Widening Consumer Horizons

The problem of local pricing raises the larger problem of encouraging people to widen their consumer horizons. There is a shyness among inner city people that tends to restrict them to their own neighborhoods. While these cable TV systems will be designed to generate community pride and responsible business, they must also build greater interest in the world outside the ghetto. Encourage people to move out into the larger city with its increased purchasing possibilities.

The ghetto consumer should know, for instance, that there are now chain department stores in New York that will extend charge accounts and credit (at reasonable rates) even to customers on welfare.

XIII. Over-Commitment

In contrast to teaching people how to buy is the responsibility for teaching people not to buy and for exploring the problems of over-commitment which exist in all income groups.

We can use two totally different approaches to these problems, fiction and non-fiction.

Applying the non-fiction approach first, we can go back to the device of using specific people in the community to illustrate bait and switch sales, for example. (This is a technique particularly common in selling furniture and used cars).

Over-Commitment (cont'd.)

We can interview a woman who went into a local store to buy a couch "on sale", only to be told the advertised couch wasn't good enough for her. Establish how, by stages, she was induced to buy a far more expensive item, one she probably couln't afford.

Or a housewife who had succumbed to a door-to-door sales pitch that led her to impetuously buy goods she didn't need and that could be bought far cheaper elsewhere.

(Note: Often companies engaged in this kind of selling practice will saturate a community and then move on. A cable TV channel, with the ability to respond as rapidly as a daily newspaper, could warn its audience of such a consumer invasion).

XIV. Soap Opera

The fictional approach towards over-commitment, and most consumer problems, also could be handled on a well-produced soap opera. The soap has been a proven staple in commercial programming. No other form has survived the shifting fashions of both radio and television as successfully.

Soap Opera (cont'd.)

A soap, designed specifically for and about ghetto life, could be the most effective way of reinforcing information, of raising the more subtle issues, and reflecting real life situations.

On a soap, one could play out the bait and switch technique rather than describe it.

One could get involved emotionally and psychologically with the problems of over-commitment, rather than having to accept the idea on an intellectual level.

Well cast, produced with humor and insight, it would have great drawing power. It could incorporate community residents in cameo roles; (there is no reason a local official or businessman couldn't play himself if a story line called for it). As in other forms of programming, everything would be done to make this series of the community as well as for the community.

XV. Utility Companies

While the ghetto consumer's involvement with utility companies is often more modest than the rest of the city's, there is certain specific information he must have.

It has been reported, for instance, that before two of the most recent fatal gas explosions people were conscious of a strong odor of gas but did not realize the danger.

Utility Companies (cont'd.)

Commercials must be produced spelling out this increasing urban hazard.

Inherent dangers in certain gas and electric appliances can be spelled out.

During periods of power shortages, users can be asked directly to lower their individual electric consumption.

Fillers could also warn telephone users that it costs more when you ask an operator to get a number for you, than when you dial it yourself.

XVI. The Environment

Environmental consumer problems, while high on the list of national priorities, have had a limited meaning in ghetto areas, for obvious reasons.

Cable television might be able to awaken interest in this field by showing residents how they can gain some control over their own environment. A series of specials, each built around a specific area in a community, would illustrate how to deal with insistent smoke pollution, dangerous street crossings, local garbage problems, disgraceful empty lots.

Example:

"This is a house on 142nd Street, with garbage strewn in the street, heavy smoke polluting the air. This is the lot next door; ugly, neglected and abused, it has become a breeding place for rats.
And this is the story of the transformation of that house and that lot and of the men and women, your neighbors, who accomplished it".

Other ecological problems are far subtler; rooted in the American way of life, they are far more difficult to influence. Some might be covered in the soap opera.

For instance, in recent discussions on the re-use of soft drink containers it was discovered that inspite of the 5¢ bounty, people in inner city areas resist bringing their bottles back because they feel it demeans them. They consider the gesture a symbol of their poverty and refuse to "run after a few pennies".

The idea that there are other reasons, even more important than the money, for re-using bottles, hasn't been demonstrated to poor people. The old-fashioned pride in the virtues of being a "string saver" has been destroyed by an economy based on "buy, throw away and buy again".

Summary

Obviously there are variants, on variants on all these programming ideas. They are simply designed to touch on major problem areas, and suggest possible ways of dealing with them.

Programming concepts are unlimited as is consumer need. But underlying it all is the question of responsibility. In a community situation where we will be naming names, pointing out specific mal-practice, endorsing specific products and businesses, the responsibility for accuracy as well as candor is acute.

It would be impossible for a cable-television operation to have its own test laboratories and to handle more than the most obvious local research.

The over-all program will undoubtedly be under fire from strong and well-financed pressure groups: car dealers, insurance organizations, the AMA, pharmaceutical organizations, chambers of commerce, retail merchants associations, etc.

So it becomes obvious the decision makers must not only be responsible but operate from such a position of strength they are above any possible community or group pressure.

This report has referred to the State agency, plus such independent groups as Consumer Union and Cornell University. The State agency while in a position to be enormously helpful is limited by its own political sensitivities and perhaps would not want a direct supervisory role in such a free-swinging forum.

It would probably be ideal if supervision could spring from a sound independently functioning group, with the State agency contributing as much as possible.